Tripping Over or Reconciling the Words of Internationalization

By John K. Hudzik

Has the discussion of internationalization become a scattershot of terms without an underlying coherency? Some conversations suggest that the terms are set in opposition, (“internationalization versus globalization”), or that one term is dying while another is rising (“globalization replacing internationalization”). Some hint that one is good (“internationalization encourages cooperation”) and the other is bad (“globalization fuels competition”). All the while, these conversations are sprinkled with other terms: cross-cultural learning and sensitivity; mobility; cross-border partnerships and networks; transnational education; internationalization of the curriculum; comprehensive internationalization; and more.

The terms associated with internationalization are no doubt proliferating, but is this surge necessarily detrimental to discussions about the subject? Instead of assuming that this growing collection of terms will hinder the conversation, it would be more effective to view these terms as complementary foundation blocks for an enriched evolution of higher education internationalization. The term “comprehensive internationalization” is one paradigm for thinking about the intermingling and integration of these building blocks.

Roots

Higher education internationalization is not a new idea. Its origin has roots hundreds, even thousands, of years ago in the intellectual centers and cultures of places such as the Platonic Academy in Athens; Confucian centers in China; the Library of Alexandria in Egypt; Nalanda in India; the Gundishapur Academy in Iran; and Renaissance Italy. These were magnets, drawing scholars, students, and the intellectually curious from afar, providing a meeting ground for the new ideas that themselves became mobile across regional and political boundaries. In these earlier times, such mobility was more individually motivated; in modern times, we see it more institutionally orchestrated.

The intellectual hubs were higher-learning settings, or began as universities in France and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and later in the German research universities. There are equivalents in twenty-first century knowledge communities that typically have a constellation of research universities as part of their core. They attract scholars and ideas from diverse places and typically intertwine multiple disciplines of thought and practice. Higher education institutions have a natural affinity for alternative perspectives because the unfettered search for universal truths requires borderless access to knowledge and mobility in ideas. This is the originating motivation behind higher education internationalization.

Innovation and learning are not bound by place, but rather aided by connections to other places and cultures. This is the telos for higher learning and for higher education internationalization. We may sometimes lose sight of the intellectual purpose when other motivations intervene, such as the revenue...
potential of international students or the desire to play the global institutional ranking game.

Internationalization is not simply the travel of people to far-away places—Leif Ericson to North America; Marco Polo to China; Admiral Zeng He throughout Asia and East Africa; or Magellan’s circumnavigation expedition. The core of internationalization is the mobility of ideas, and ideas can spread by many means. The Internet has accelerated the spread of ideas through a global electronic network, and on campus, curriculum internationalization has brought international learning to students who may not have been able to study abroad otherwise.

If the mobility of ideas is to have impact, the recipient must be open to their arrival. Partly this is the domain of intercultural learning and sensitivity, and the broader requirement of open-mindedness to the new and different. The successful internationalization of learning overcomes resistance to new ideas (“we don’t do it that way”) and barriers imposed by the source of new ideas (“they aren’t like us”). Learning obliges a reciprocal receptivity between the sender and the receiver of an idea.

A Changing Twenty-First Century Environment

Today, globalization is reconfiguring, not replacing, earlier conceptions of international engagement. Further reshaping comes from the intermingling of five concepts: “international, global, comparative, networks, and comprehensive internationalization.”

International

Historically, the term “international” references bi- and multi-lateral relations among sovereign states, some through formal treaties, others no less powerfully through trade patterns. In higher education, these relations are mirrored in the free-market global mobility of students and scholars, and more formally, in exchange agreements and cross-border collaborative research and problem-solving partnerships. These institutional agreements are a bit like treaties among sovereign entities.

Some recent cross-border agreements, such as the Bologna Accord, have begun to mediate aspects of institutional sovereignty. Of course, higher education institutions are not truly sovereign as they are responsible to other influences, such as government regulations, accreditation, and legal requirements, but one institution can rarely be made “subject” to another. Yet, the kind of collaboration emerging in a few of the more recent partnerships mediate institutional independence by forging joint steering and policy groups; jointly appointed administrators with decisionmaking authority; or modifying individual institutional policies, course, or degree requirements, which may be the case in the University of Warwick and Monash University collaboration.

Global

Globalization emerges from world-spanning forces and factors transcending sovereign boundaries. Instant global communication and the virtually unbound movement of people, ideas, and commodities exponentially diversify the global flow of just about everything, both good and bad. Access to ideas originating anywhere on the planet expands knowledge and levels advantage for learning, research, and applications across the globe. Is there any discipline of inquiry not better informed by cross-border perspective, nor unable to make a useful contribution to the global idea network?

Globalization has consequences for how institutions organize their cross-border learning and discovery activities. In the mid-twentieth century, Title VI of the U.S. National Defense Education Act, passed in the aftermath of Sputnik, funded the creation of regionally compartmentalized centers to study various world regions. However, as we moved toward the twenty-first century, thematic centers in international business, health, agriculture, international development, global environmental studies, and peace studies emerged, demonstrating that nearly everything today has local-to-global and cross-regional connections. Theme-focused centers recognize the globalization of opportunities, problems, and solutions. Because globalization is mediated differently by localities, there is the basis for comparative analysis of the impacts of globalization across cultures and
regions. Understanding the regional context remains important, but so does understanding cross-regional influences and interactions.

**Comparative**

**Comparative methodologies** are central to inquiry; they identify similarities and differences across entities, and identify causes. Comparative methodology is core to building cross-cultural understanding, widening appreciation for diversity, and building mutual understanding. Comparative methodologies offer means to look not only across borders in bi- and multi-lateral terms, but in global terms. The danger to avoid in a comparative approach is letting “us versus them” or “good versus bad” dominate the approach, rather than learning from the differences.

There has been a maturing of how comparative studies manifest themselves in higher education internationalization, particularly in internationalizing the curriculum. There are at least three stages of sophistication in thinking “comparatively” in the context of curriculum internationalization:

1. Adding cross-border content, concepts, and examples to the curriculum without engaging a real comparative analysis (e.g., we added the “international stuff” to week 10 of the semester);

2. Infusing the curriculum with content throughout that reflects diverse perspectives and knowledge of differences and similarities;

3. Transitioning from the comparative exploration of diversity of culture and place toward critical thinking and learning through the lenses of different cultures and world views.

In this last stage, we change ways of thinking by adopting new methodologies, raising different epistemological questions, and developing critical consciousness and values awareness for a globally diverse environment.

There is a very strong intercultural basis for the third level of internationalizing the curriculum. That is, it is hard to learn from other cultures if there is no skill in intercultural relations, sensitivity, and communication. Communication is not just in language but through ways of thinking and epistemology.

**Networks**

Historically and contemporaneously, intellectual hubs get much of the attention, but it is networks that make hubs as much as hubs the networks. Together, the global levelling of capacity for innovation, emergence of the Internet, and the near elimination of effective gatekeepers of ideas are leading higher education internationalization into a more complex set of cross-border relationships.

The more numerous intellectual and institutional hubs exist also as parts of more numerous idea networks that run through multidimensional idea and talent trade routes. Patterns of flow frequently shift or reroute depending on issues, interests, and needs, such as mangrove ecology in Vietnam and Louisiana; stem-cell research in the United States, Singapore, and Europe; and software development in the U.S. Silicon Valley and India. The issues and network combinations are endless.

The emergence of a global higher education system and the flattening of instructional and research capacity (in Thomas Friedman’s terms) are proliferating the number of hubs and networks shaping the sources and flow of ideas. In Ben Wildavsky’s terms, it is global brain circulation rather than “brain drain.” The multi-hub and matrix higher-education network is becoming a reality.

We are beyond the unidirectional learning and assistance models of older development networks. In transitioning from assistance to partnership, no one has all the right ideas. Instead we acquire insight by seeing how others define and approach similar challenges elsewhere in the world. In doing so, we give up parts of institutional “sovereignty” in setting research priorities, defining research questions, and determining the content and design of courses, curricula, and degree requirements.

**Under the Comprehensive Internationalization Umbrella**

The idea of higher education internationalization is evolving and filling out. It is a multi-faceted concept
with many ideas beginning to coalesce to interconnect its dimensions. To think and act “comprehensively” about higher education internationalization benefits from sorting through the various ideas and concepts that surround it while seeking to understand how they fit into the larger evolving internationalization picture.

From one angle, the discussion seems rife with divergent and peripheral terms that only serve to trip us up. But seen through the perspective of “comprehensive internationalization,” these terms appear to form a more unified whole, a solid base that flourishes by highlighting the interconnectedness of all relevant ideas and concepts.

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